West of the Rockies

The neglected discipline

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The wind wheeled with deliberate menace, chopping the water white with froth. The sheet of black rain riding in on it promised to arrive in less than 5 minutes. Pauker muttered to himself, stomped off the dock, and headed up the trail back to the cabin. After the briefest thought of braving the weather, I followed him through the swaying pines toward the amber light above. I reached the porch door just as the shatter of rain began to pound the cabin roof. The wind behind it gusted to gale force. I was glad to be inside.

Pauker bent into the fieldstone fireplace, lighting newspaper and kindling. We had driven 900 miles, farther north than the northern-most paved road in Quebec, to reach trout water now beset by a storm that might last for days. The wind was so strong you could barely drive a bullet through it, much less a dry fly. If I was sullen with frustration, Pauker would be filled with his patented quiet rage. Better to let the wood fire work its magic and loosen him with good wine in the process.

"'S'not bad. What is it?"

"Margaux," I answered.

"Which?" asked Pauker.

"No, it's Margaux itself. Chateau Margaux."

"You brought a Chateau Margaux up here?" Pauker asked. "You really are out of your mind."

"You're welcome," I said. "It's an '83." I thought I could see the muscles of his jaw relax. Maybe the wine would prevail. I held out my glass toward him in toast.

"In vino veritas," I offered.

"Veritas," he spat back. "Veritas, indeed."

"Can we talk about flyfishing?" I asked.

"No," said Pauker. "No we can't. But we can talk about veritas—truth. Or teaching, which is the same thing." Pauker moved to his fire once again, poked at it with the iron, then draped an arm along the mantel. He sipped his wine and looked off out the window at the driving rain.

"I find it incredible that such a great school can devalue teaching the way it does."

"No argument there."

"I mean, we all grouse about how poor our public schools are, how we pay our plumbers and electricians triple what our teachers earn. And then we do the same thing. Whom do we value most at our medical centers?"

"Our plumbers and electricians?" I answered. Pauker looked at me with disgust in his eyes.

"In the Midwest, just a few months ago, one of our eminent 'electricians' who earns seven figures left his department and took his people with him. He didn't want to pay the Dean's tax. What's happened to us?"

"It's all about the bottom line these days, isn't it," I said. "We value the money-maker, whoever fills the cath lab, gets the grant, attracts the philanthropic dollar." I looked up at my hulking friend and academic, brightest in our class, and still the brightest light anywhere.

"What good is it if we can't teach it?" he said.

"Ah . . . you've lost me," I answered.

"What's it all for?" said Pauker. "The buildings, the laboratories, the great libraries, the classrooms, the greatest collection of thinkers on the planet supported by the finest university infrastructure imaginable . . . what's its purpose, after all?"

I had an idea this question might be rhetorical. I said nothing.

"It is to preserve knowledge, certainly, act as a repository for it, yes, and add to it, of course, do research. That's part of it. But mostly, aren't we in the business of imparting that knowledge so that it can be put to use?" said Pauker.

"Wonders of the Invisible World"/Jud Hartmann

Iroquois have passed on time-honored healing rituals for centuries

"Teaching again . . .," I said lamely.

"Teaching is what it's all about, for God's sake!" bellowed Pauker. "It's called a 'school' after all, isn't it? We're surrounded by students, are we not? Why don't we value teaching?

"I'll tell you why," said Pauker as I opened my mouth to answer. "Because teaching is perceived as something anyone can do if only he puts his mind to it . . . like writing," he said, gesturing toward me.

"Are you pandering to me?" I asked.

"I never pander," said Pauker. He continued. "We have no system. We know intuitively what a good teacher is and can sometimes recognize one when we see one . . . like beauty, I suppose. Not a bad metaphor, really. But we don't know how to cultivate good teachers. Hell, we don't even bother cultivating them. In the presence of a great teacher, the rest of us all harbor the thought that we could probably do just as good a job if only we put our minds to it, if only we cared to bother with the great unwashed, those students clinging to our lab coats. Oh, we have faculty who spout facts, hand out lists, distribute reprints and references, and call that teaching. We have students with imaginations so compromised by video input that they rarely have an original thought, deluged by tasks of memory that would burn out a mainframe. And when, occasionally, someone comes along who cares deeply that a student learn, that a student's curiosity be nurtured, that bringing together student and patient for a meaningful length of time might be important, what do we do with this real teacher? We demand he make his salary seeing patients, shuffling paper, or winning grants."

"There isn't the money . . .," I offered.

"There isn't the will," said Pauker.

I stifled a yawn.

"Am I boring you?" said Pauker.

"No, of course not. The wine . . . the drive up here. We should turn in anyway. That front may move through tonight, and we could have some early morning dry-fly fishing. What do you say?"

We were both up at dawn, Pauker getting the woodstove fired up, while I got buttered toast, Canadian bacon, and fried eggs on the table, having left any lipid concerns at the border. I strained the coffee through a dish towel—I'd forgotten the filters—and we both ate hastily, gulped down two cups each, and were down at the canoe in a half-hour. The water was flat-calm, mist rising, sunrise too spectacular for words. We paddled over to the river's outlet, beached the canoe, and walked up the shoreline. Pauker found his favorite flat rock, and I went on to fish the pools above him. The caddis flies hatched on schedule at 11, we broke for sandwiches and wine at 1, and headed back to camp at sunset, hardly having said 10 words to each other all day.

"Seven," said Pauker. "Seven, and none less than 3 lb. How many for you?"

"Seven," I said. "All right on top." It had been a magical, mellowing day, that sort of moment in time that can inspire, as it did Pauker.

"You know," he said, "once upon a time there existed a civilization that did value their teachers. I mean, their whole survival depended upon good teaching. I'm talking about the Iroquois. The pre-Columbian Iroquois, I mean. They had no alphabet, no written language. They would have viewed that as a distraction, anyway. And do I have to point out that they had no television?

"Yet, they had a body of botanical medicine that would have embarrassed the medical science of contemporary Europe. They

had a spoken literature, a library of history, a rich store of mythology, a theology, and a sophisticated philosophy—all preserved, perpetuated, and handed down for centuries through . . . well, through what?"

"Teaching?" I said.

Dinner was filet of walleye we had caught in the lake, baked with onions, potatoes, and carrots in a clay pot caked with the essence of many meals gone by—"stodge," Pauker called it. We decided on the St Estephe, unwound, and stared into the fire wordless for an hour before bedding down.

At noon the next day, after a morning of stonefly hatches and rising trout, we sunned ourselves on the flat rock, ate fish paté sandwiches, and soothed our souls with the poetry of the water. Pauker scanned the spruce, watched the mergansers out on the lake, and filled himself with lecture.

"The Iroquoian doctors were incredible! They used a tea of sumac leaves and berries, of wild cherry bark and trillium root, a tea which we would learn 400 years later contained analgesics and parturients for easing the pain of labor and augmenting contractions. They kept their hands out of the laboring patient's vagina and admonished their students again and again to do the same. Remember that this was the 15th century."

Pauker paused and turned to me. He was filled with energy. And he was doing what he loved more than flyfishing. He was teaching.

"It was the herbalists who were the medicine men, or more correctly medicine women, since the art was taught to women. They learned the art better, were more careful, made better doctors, and the Iroquois relied on that. For teaching them these great things, the Iroquois honored their teachers and loved them for it. They valued their teachers. And the greatest of them became immortalized."

Pauker caught sight of a rise 30 ft away and rose quietly to cast to it, measuring his false casts, gauging the distance, flicking his Green Drake out to the trout's feeding station.

"The same could be said," he yelled over his shoulder, "for universities."

He hooked the trout, played and lost it, and then became absorbed in another rise and so was lost in fishing for the rest of the day.

Two days later he took it up again:

"Universities, just like individuals, get distracted by money, greed, power, and fame. And just like individuals, they have to be forgiven for that and reminded once again of first principles. Teaching is our first principle." He pointed his fork at me.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," I said. He ignored me.

"Teaching is where it's at for universities, although they too often lose sight of that. They will live and die on the quality of their teaching, just as the Iroquois did because of their professors of botany. I am sure one could rewrite the history of medicine from the point of view of teaching, the quality of it, or lack thereof. That would be a fascinating study, the rise and fall of medical school prominence predicated on the quality of teaching. There's a writing project for you, my friend."

"I have enough writing projects, thank you," I said.

"I hope," continued Pauker unchecked, "I hope you don't get the wrong idea here. Or more exactly, that you won't get just part of the message. That Iroquoian physician was *showing* those kids how to do it and at the same time, how to improvise and adapt and change and invent. How to think, in other words. And all the time, that teacher was scanning the ranks, looking for the kid with an exceptional curiosity, the gift of eloquence and an inclination for helping her fellow student identify leaf and root and scale of bark. That child would be singled out and developed into the teacher of tomorrow. The survival of the Iroquois depended on it."

"Hey, I've got it!" I said. "Here, have some of this Brunello." Pauker held out his jelly-jar. "Here's a story. Picture this. Sometime in the not-too-distant future, you have a medical school class sitting there, teacher at hand. And you have some sort of scanning device, better than our PET scanners of today, less confining, able to be aimed like a laser. And you scan the teacher, not for his wealth of knowledge, but for his love of the art, for his enthusiasm, for his drive to make them understand. At the same time, you scan the students and register the glow of their cerebral cortices. You begin to quantify teaching and learning, in a way never before imagined. You start to develop a science of teaching one could only have. . . ."

"Oh, I like that, pal," Pauker said. "I like that. Write *that* story! And pass the Brunello."